

Co-Working Meets Co-Learning

At first glance, Workspace looks like any other co-working environment. Nestled in a business park in Bethel, Connecticut, the entrance to the red, barn-like building opens into a bright lobby with offices, cubicle spaces, lounges, studios, and a kitchen. It's not long before visitors realize that Workspace is used here as a verb, not a noun, and that this space is much more than a shared office. Workspacing is something families *do*, tailoring work and education in their own ways, while in community with others. Combining co-working and co-learning, with a prevailing spirit of entrepreneurship, Workspace Education is on the cutting-edge of innovative K-12 learning models.

For its founder, Cath Fraise, Workspace fills a void. When she launched the center in 2016, Fraise envisioned a dynamic space that would allow parents to work, children to learn, businesses to sprout, and community to flourish—all in a collaborative, multi-generational setting. “I started by wanting to make a school, but I wanted everyone to be able to afford it,” she says.

I also wanted to incubate social entrepreneurs and have a space where everyone is working and creating small businesses.

Trained as a Montessori educator who taught in public schools in Australia, Fraise spent the past decade doing project-based homeschooling with her two children, who are now 20 and 16. She wanted to create a space that would support learners with a wide assortment of educational resources, while also supporting their parents who are pursuing their own career goals and entrepreneurial endeavors.

A Concierge Model

Workspace acts on a concierge model of learning and working. In addition to a one-time \$1,500 upfront fee for 10 hours of parent training and onboarding, parents pay \$3,500 per year per child (with sibling discounts). This combined fee gives them access to six days a week of shared office space, WiFi, and business support, while working with Workspace staff and education specialists to tailor a learning plan for their child, who joins them at Workspace each day.

The affordable cost gives parents and their children unlimited support and access to all Workspace amenities and offerings, including the art studios, music room, research labs, gym, wood shop, and maker-space; “Families say that Workspace is just as good for the parents as the children,” says Fraise. but some of Workspace’s 80 families take advantage of additional services, such as private tutoring and weekly classes offered by outside

educators.

For instance, some families use a popular Workspace math tutor, a former Morgan Stanley employee, who charges \$50 per child for seven weeks of weekly, one-hour math instruction. Another popular lab class, taught by a Yale-trained Ph.D. scientist, costs families \$1,200 per year for two hours of lab work and instruction each week. There is also an onsite Acton Academy (\$6,800/year for full-time enrollment) if parents want a drop-off education option. According to Fraise, most parents don't pay for additional drop-off programming and rely instead on the robust resources and supportive environment that Workspace offers each of its members. "Families say that Workspace is just as good for the parents as the children," says Fraise. "We're an interdependent community uniting to create the best education for the children in the building."

Working and Learning Together

The supportive learning and working community is what attracted Melanie Ryan to Workspace. Her 11-year-old son, Justin, spent his early elementary years in a private Montessori school and then went to public school, where he struggled. "The teacher was amazing," says Ryan, "but he does have some special needs such as attention deficits, as well as being a very physically active, athletic boy, so sitting for seven hours a day and not having a lot of options wasn't a good fit for him."

His mother says that Justin, who had previously been a happy, agreeable kid, experienced serious school-related trauma and self-loathing, saying things like, "I'm stupid." Ryan, a psychotherapist who has been in private practice for over 15 years, knew she had to do something to address her child's emotional distress. She pulled Justin out of public school in December 2018 and registered him as a homeschooler in their home state of New York. It was a big leap. "My husband and I own the largest holistic health center in the Hudson Valley where I see clients during the week and run classes on the weekends," says Ryan, who was unsure how she was going to manage working full-time while overseeing her son's education. "I had a lot on my plate," she adds.

Then Ryan heard about Workspace from a friend and decided to make the 45-minute drive to Connecticut for a visit. "I knew right away this was it," she says. "As soon as we arrived, Justin was greeted by a boy that he would shadow for the day, and then he was just off for hours. I couldn't get him to leave!" Now, Ryan spends three days a week at Workspace, doing therapy calls via Skype with clients around the world, managing her team of practitioners and handling marketing and promotion of her business, while Justin takes classes in math, reading and creative writing, studio art and cartooning, woodworking, science, law and government. While Ryan sees clients offsite one day a week, her husband goes to Workspace, where he leads a football club for Justin and his peers in between his own meetings and client work. On Thursdays, Justin joins his mother and father at their

clinic.

Workspace helps to cultivate personal and professional opportunities for parents while supporting their children. Ryan has begun to see some clients during the week in the private offices at Workspace, as well as offer classes to members and the larger community. She is also taking a digital photography class through Workspace, helping her to reconnect with a long-ignored passion. “It’s really a village,” she says of Workspace.

As a working parent and entrepreneur, I can really rely on my fellow parents that I am co-creating with here. If I need time to leave Workspace for a meeting, I can easily ask another parent to keep an eye on Justin and I do the same for them.

This is one feature that has encouraged single parents to join Workspace.

Incubating Young Entrepreneurs

Parents aren’t the only ones pursuing entrepreneurship at Workspace. Brady Knuff and Forrest Anderson both left their respective high schools after their junior year to dedicate their time to building a business. Now enrolled virtually in the North Atlantic Regional High School, a Maine-based private program for nontraditional students, the duo will earn an accredited high school diploma while spending what would be their senior year immersed in their entrepreneurial efforts.

“My experience with Workspace is a little bit different than others’ because I’m not taking classes here,” says Knuff. “I’m using it as an incubator for my business.” These young entrepreneurs use the technology and business support resources at Workspace, such as video editing equipment and access to ongoing mentorship, to expand their nascent real estate marketing company, Blukite.

Asked why he decided to leave his high school for Workspace, Knuff explains:

This year I wanted to work on the business more seriously. Really it was just a matter of time. I would have to be at school until at least 3 p.m., then sports, then homework. I never had the time or the resources to devote to it.

Anderson adds:

At first I was skeptical because I didn't know if I wanted to leave my high school, but I've always wanted to be an entrepreneur and I felt like this is the time.

Both boys are uncertain if they will attend college someday, but they admit it's a possibility. "I'm going to work on this for a couple of years and see where I am financially to decide if I want to go to college," says Anderson.

Under Fraise's leadership, Workspace continues to add families and expand its square footage, but she is not content for it to be a stand-alone success story. "I see this as the future of education," says Fraise, who views Workspace as the flagship model for co-working and co-learning spaces.

I want these to spontaneously erupt everywhere, and I want to give away what I've learned to help others to do it.

To that end, Fraise offers training programs and support to entrepreneurial educators who are interested in launching their own Workspace-like organizations.

She is also hopeful about bringing the Workspace model into low-income communities, expanding opportunity and encouraging entrepreneurship. "I have faith in families," she says.

The key is professional development for the parents, helping them find income streams and role modeling for their children, as well as increasing opportunity through our network.

Follow me on Twitter or LinkedIn. Check out my website or some of my other work here.